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FOOD, SEX, AND THE LIFE OF PRACTICE
(Lecture delivered by Master Sheng Yen
Sunday, January 6, 1985)

The opening section of the Surangama sutra introduces two subjects that can pose problems in practice: food and sex. These form our substance and bring us into existence. Without food and sex, life would not be possible.

I am often asked, "What is the difference between a householder and someone who has left home -- a monk or a nun?" Some people may think that there is not much difference between them, and in a certain sense they are right. But we have this term, "left home." It does mark a difference in people. Even among householders there are those who practice and those who do not. There is a significance to "practice." Attitudes towards food and sex are what make the difference.

According to Buddhist classification, food and sex are two of five major groups of desires. The other three are desire for fame, desire for wealth, and desire for sleep. It is quite possible for a person who lacks opportunity or ability to give up the desire for fame. Someone who is barely surviving will most likely be able to give up the desire for wealth -- he has so many other problems. Sleep may be important, but someone who is hungry will still dream of food when he's asleep.

We have two desires left. How shall we choose between them? Let's take the following situation: You can have a woman or a man, wife or husband, but the condition is -- no food. Most of us would say, "Forget the spouse, just give me some food. At least I'll be able to survive." Human instincts are not very different from those of animals. Once you have eaten your fill, the next thing that comes to your mind is sex.

When I was a child in mainland China, there was a family of beggars I often saw in our town -- the wife carrying a child in her arms, dragging one by the hand behind her, and the husband carrying a yoke with two containers and a child in each one. The whole family would go from house to house begging for food.

Once I saw a wealthy man scolding them. He shouted, "You're so poor you can't even feed yourselves, and still you continue to have one child after the other. Who do you think is going to feed all of these mouths?" The beggar was not impressed; he felt entirely justified in having so many children. "Look at the fish in the sea," he said, "they have nothing, not even clothes, and yet when the time comes they lay their eggs -- hundreds of them. Birds fill their nests when it is their time. And I'm a human being -- just like them, I, too, should have a lot of children."

That's the nature of sentient beings. Once they feed themselves, they think of sex and procreation. But this is quite natural. It doesn't necessarily have to be a man in love with a woman, or a woman with a man. It can simply be desire. We may call this a kind of "greed," but it is useful in maintaining the species. Confucius said, "Food and Sex are human nature. You cannot be harsh in blaming people for having such desires."

Now let's talk about practice. Depending upon what level you have achieved, there are different criteria and rules for dealing with food and sex. There is a different role prescribed for householders, those who have left home, and those who have attained sagehood. There are four levels associated with desires. The first is called "recognizing the desires." The second is "regulating desires." The third is "leaving behind desires." The fourth is "terminating desires."

To reach the first level you have to know what desire is. You have to recognize that food and sex are desires. On the second level you control your desires -- you strive not to be overindulgent. On the third level you begin to leave desires behind. You develop a certain aversion or dispassion towards desires. At the fourth level desires no longer exist. If you think that you can cut off all desires as soon as you start to practice, well, you can't. It's quite impossible. It's not really helpful to set up lofty goals right at the beginning.

People who have never had any experience in practice don't know what desire is. They only know that they want something. They are not aware of the benefit or harm that following this desire might bring.

When we begin to practice we should try to understand our desires, and we should see how they can be useful and how they may also increase our vexations. With this understanding, we can avoid taking attitudes or actions that might increase our suffering, and consequently we will put our efforts into directions that will enhance our living and well-being. This is "recognizing, or understanding, desires."

Food is perhaps less of a problem than sex. A practitioner, however, is not greatly concerned that his food be elegant or delicious, only that it is healthful and nutritious. A non-practitioner might eat simply for enjoyment or indulgence.

Buddhists have a broad perspective of food. We divide food into three categories, sectional, contact, and consciousness. These categories take in both our physical and mental needs. Sectional food is everyday food and drink necessary for the maintenance of our physical bodies. Contact food is both physical and mental. An example of this would be patting a child on the head or kissing him on the cheek. Is this physical or mental? You make contact and the child senses you as a human being. If the child's body comes into contact with a block of wood, will this make him feel good? Not at all.

Not long ago a doctor questioned me about the celibate life. He said, "You're a monk. You have no wife, and you can never embrace or be embraced by a woman. This is against human nature." I said, "Yes, you're quite right." "In that case," the doctor continued, "isn't this a vexation and a hardship for you -- you are denied something that everybody else can have?" I said to him, "Well, you're certainly right there. Being with a woman is something others can have and I can't. On the other hand, there are many kinds of suffering that lay people have that I don't."

Yesterday a householder came to talk to me. He spent a lot of time telling me how awful his wife was. He listed her every fault. I asked him, "If your wife is so bad, how come you married her?" "Well, I don't know," he said, "I just wanted to have a wife." So I said to him, "If you want to have a wife, you have to accept her as she is." He said, "Wait a minute, I came here hoping that you would tell me how to deal with her, not just tell me to accept her and all of the rotten things about her." I said, "Look, you wanted a wife because you thought she could bring you happiness. But you have to realize that she is bound to have faults -- these are part of her, too. You can't expect to have the best parts of her character and somehow separate and remove all of her bad parts. If she's so bad how did you manage raising four children with her?" He said raising the children with her was a nightmare, so I asked him, "What's really going on? Why all of these complaints?"

This householder finally said, "The problem with her is that she's the jealous type. Well, yes, it just so happens that I have a girlfriend." "O.K.," I said, "the problem is obviously ignorance on your part, because here you are complaining about the suffering and vexation your wife has caused you, and now you're going to another woman. You have just doubled your vexation." He went on, "You don't understand, my wife is no good, and my girlfriend is wonderful." When I asked him what it was that was so terrible about his wife, he told me that the problem was that she spent all of her time with the kids, and had no time left to take care of him. I said, "What will happen if your girlfriend has kids, too; you'll be back in the same boat again?" This worried him, and he told me he didn't know what to do. I said I couldn't decide for him -- he would have to do that for himself. When he was about to leave, he turned and said, "This is all caused by bad luck. I was predestined to a life of suffering. I have no choice but to accept it." "It's not bad luck," I said,

"you brought this upon yourself. What's the matter with you -- you've got a wife and kids, you go out and find a girlfriend, and then you complain about your suffering?" As he left he said, "O.K., maybe I'll think about that."

So you see that whereas I may not have the pleasure of some householders, I certainly don't have the kind of suffering that they can have, either.

Now, "contact food." This includes not only just touching, but sexual relationships as well. Indeed, a sexual relationship is necessary for most human beings. Such a relationship is both physical and mental; physical, because it provides physical pleasure; mental, because it provides consolation and emotional release. Sex, then, is not just necessary to continue the species, but it contributes to the pleasure and comfort of life. To require everyone to completely abstain from sex is both impossible and wrong -- it would cause more harm than good.

The third kind of food is "consciousness food." All activities associated with the mind are included in this category: entertainment, art, religion, as well as simple thoughts about the past or imaginings of the future.

When you practice I tell you, "Don't think of the past. Don't think of the future. Simply hold to your method -- and just practice. This is the best attitude." I say this about practice, but I don't recommend it as an ordinary attitude. You have to remember the past and you have to plan for the future, otherwise it would be impossible for you to live your everyday life.

Affirming the past establishes a continuity from which you can proceed. Without this continuity you will have no foundation, and you will not be able to progress from one moment to the next. Planning for the future, hope for tomorrow, and a recognition of what will come to be at life's end are all important for living a full life. Otherwise you may be a pessimist. With no hope for the future you will lack energy and accomplish nothing. Between the affirmation of our past and the hope for the future, we sustain ourselves in the present moment. Only with this attitude can we raise our spirits and make progress. Of course, to sit and do nothing but mourn or gloat over the past or dream about the future is a sign of insanity.

This consciousness food, like section and contact food, is essential for the continuance of ordinary people. They cannot do without it.

Up until now we have been concerned with the first level, recognition of desires. There's no mystery about the second level, regulating desires. There may be many desires that we can't avoid without, but this doesn't mean we must completely indulge in them. Even if we try to control ourselves one percent of the time, this is a beginning. Practitioners know they shouldn't gorge themselves, just eat enough so they don't go

hungry. That's good enough. There are many people who, given enough delicious food, will eat themselves right into oblivion.

I once knew a monk in the mainland who really liked to eat. Others criticized the enormous quantities of food that he ate. He defended himself by saying, "I'm a monk. I don't have a wife. I have no wealth. I don't have anything. At least let me eat, satisfy my appetite, and give a little stimulation to my taste buds. Anyway, all I eat is vegetarian food, so don't criticize me." At New Year's feasts there was a particular food, a sweet-rice dumpling, that this monk cherished. One time he ate a prodigious quantity of these dumplings. The other monks cautioned him, "Come on, stop this gluttony, otherwise you'll eat enough dumplings to kill yourself." But he just said, "No problem, even if I die, no problem." However, after everyone had gone to sleep, a huge mass of undigested dumplings still sat in his stomach, and he couldn't sleep. He recalled that Buddha said that slow walking will help digestion. He got up and did some slow walking. He was still uncomfortable, so what did he do? He took a big wooden fish (a wooden bell in the shape of a fish) and hung it around his neck so that it rested right on his abdomen. He continued to walk with the fish massaging his stomach, hitting it with a stick for extra effect, and reciting the Buddha's name. He would strike the fish and recite, "Amitabha Buddha! O, let me vomit what I ate!" Strike again and say, "Amitabha Buddha! At least let me have a little fart!" Again, "Amitabha Buddha! I want to die!" I don't know if any of you have ever eaten as much as he did, but I'm sure all of us have overeaten at one time or another.

Regulating desires in terms of sex? Well, you should not take the attitude that now that you have a wife, you want a second one, or a girlfriend, or a third wife. In ancient China the emperor was entitled to three official queens and 72 concubines. In the T'ang dynasty there was a queen who had four or five male consorts, but she was severely criticized for this from that time until the present -- perhaps this is something of a double standard. Even nowadays there are similar problems. I once met a woman who told me she was bent on revenge -- her husband was seeing three "women." She said, "I just want two men. That's fair. That's one less than he has. I want him to know how it feels." My response was, "Don't tell me any of this, tell your husband." Eventually both she and her husband came to see me. I said, "What do you want me to do, set you up with a boyfriend, or you with a girlfriend? Or do you want me to help you separate?" The husband said, "Shih-fu, you told my wife to ask me if it's all right to have two men." I replied, "Yes, I told her to tell you about her plan, but I didn't tell her to go out and find a another man. If you want her to go and find another man, well, that's your business. If you two want to stay together, you'll have to work that out between yourselves."

If you introduce a third person into a family as these people have tried, you really start to have problems. As practitioners, we should at least stay away from such obvious pitfalls. One man or one woman -- that should be sufficient.

Regulating desire means more than just staying within a relationship. The life of a couple should include the pursuit of common ideas and goals. Energy directed in this way cuts down the need for wayward sexual involvement, and, consequently, sexual desire can be further controlled and channeled.

There is nothing easy about attaining the third level, leaving behind desire. Regulating desire is relatively simple. Most rational people, can do it. Leaving desire behind, on the other hand, takes enormous willpower and determination. This should not be mistaken for impotency. Someone who is impotent may have little willpower, and, may in fact have strong sexual desire, but he is simply unable to satisfy it. A person who can leave desire behind is able to sublimate his sexual power and turn it into willpower. Such a person is by no means impotent, rather his sexual energy is transformed. In fact, sexual power is life-power. It is the source of stamina and energy. A successful practitioner has strong sexual power -- life-power which enables him to accomplish his goals. The Buddha, considered the Great, the Powerful, and the Fearless was by no means impotent.

Above leaving behind desire is the fourth level, terminating desire. Someone who leaves desire behind simply chooses not to follow or develop desire. It doesn't mean that such thoughts never appear in his mind. If there are significant changes in his circumstances or environment, he may once again indulge in desire, even after many years of abstinence.

A number of years ago there was a Catholic priest who rose very high in his order, in fact he became a Chinese bishop. But when he was almost sixty years old, he left the priesthood. Up until this time his life was undoubtedly pure, but when he reached sixty he gave up his vows and decided to marry. This clearly illustrates the difference between the third level, leaving behind desire, and the fourth level, terminating desire.

In order to reach the fourth level a practitioner must attain the level of Arhat, in the Hinayana or Theravada tradition, or the eighth Bodhisattva level. At this point there is no longer any sexual instinct or desire. Thus if a practitioner states that he has terminated his desires, he may not be telling the truth, or he may be fooling himself.

Actually, the determination of when desire exists is quite subtle. If a woman sees a handsome man, and thinks, "He's very handsome," or if a man notices a woman and thinks, "She's very beautiful," this is sexual desire. A man doesn't have to think, "I'd like to sleep with her." No, all that's necessary is the thought that someone is handsome or beautiful. That contains desire. According to the Bodhisattva precepts, it is the mind that matters. A little thought can indeed break the precepts. Whether or not you actually act out your desire is irrelevant.

Let's look at sexual desire from the point of view of the second level, regulating desire. Sexual desire has various levels, but ordinary people make no such distinctions. For them two people either have had intercourse or they haven't. Likewise for someone who has taken the precept of not having sex, either they have had sex or they haven't.

For Bodhisattva's the gradations are much finer. There are five levels. The lowest level is bodily contact -- having intercourse. On a somewhat higher level, contact with the hands -- shaking or holding hands, for example. Higher still would be engaging in conversation. Above that looking at each other. And last, hearing someone's voice, or smelling their fragrance. If your mind is on a very low level, your vexation will be heavy. On a high level, the vexation will be much lighter.

A practitioner who makes up his mind to follow the Bodhisattva path will be considered a Bodhisattva. So it is possible for Bodhisattvas to be at many different levels. When a Bodhisattva gets to the highest level, his sexual desire is really confined to looking at someone, hearing their voice, or smelling their fragrance. Such a Bodhisattva, on a superficial level, would be leading a very pure life. But he would not have reached the level of terminating desires.

Ordinary practitioners and monks and nuns can probably reach the third level. They would not have bodily contact. I mention this because many people have asked me about the proper attitude toward sex for practitioners, monks and nuns.

As practitioners, we should at least be able to recognize desire. The whole aim of practice is to cut down vexations, and ultimately to terminate them. To start in this direction we must begin to control our desires. We should avoid sexual misconduct. We should avoid overindulgence. To reach the higher levels we must try to cultivate samadhi. This will help us move from regulating desires to leaving desires behind.

In the West there have been cases of young girls who tried to tempt Catholic priests to see whether they do in fact have sexual desires. In the East there are similar cases with monks. There is really no need for such tests, chances are they will succeed. These people often continue to have sexual desire. Monks and nuns, should not test the strength of their willpower or their practice. They should recognize that they are still ordinary sentient beings who have not terminated desire. Even leaving desire behind is not so easy to do. We should not try to test ourselves. Rather we should use the precepts to clearly delimit what is right and not right for us to do.

There is a certain sect whose adherents claim that they can reach a level of liberation where it is quite all right for them to have sexual relationships. They say their minds will not move, nor will they be tempted when they have sex. Such claims are doubtful, and they should not be trusted.

***** NEWS ITEMS *****

There will be open house meditations on the weekends during the time Shih-fu is gone: August, September, October. They will begin on Friday evenings at 8 p.m. and go through to the beginning of the program on Sundays at 11 a.m. Anyone may participate in all or any part of the weekend. A \$10 donation for the weekend includes all meals.

Shih-fu will return on November 3. The schedule at the Center will be the following:

Saturday, November 9, (9 a.m. - 5 p.m.) - Beginning Meditation Class. Includes methods of sitting, breathing, walking, exercises, massage, as well as Buddhist philosophy. \$40.

November 28, (7 p.m.) - December 5, (8 a.m.) - Seven-day Intensive Ch'an Retreat: an opportunity for students to practice Ch'an under the personal guidance of Master Sheng-Yen. For those with meditation experience only. Personal interview a prerequisite. Write or call for registration from. \$120.

December 14, (9 a.m. - 5 p.m.) - Beginning Meditation Class.

December 25 (7 p.m.) - January 1 (8 a.m.) Seven-day Intensive Ch'an Retreat: same information as above.

When Shih-fu returns there will be two weekly classes, starting the week of November 4.

Monday night class (7:30 - 9:30 p.m.) - Avatamsaka School of philosophy, or another subject, according to the majority request of the class. (\$10 for non-members). Please call the Center to enroll in advance.

Wednesday night class (7:30 - 9:30 p.m.) - Discussions on topics of interest to the class. For members only. Please call the Center to enroll in advance.

ALL ARE WELCOME

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